
“Basketball Diplomacy in Africa: An Oral History from SEED Project to the Basketball Africa League (BAL)”

An Information & Knowledge Exchange project funded by SOAS University of London. *Under the direction of Dr J Simon Rofe, Reader in Diplomatic and International Studies, Centre for International Studies and Diplomacy, SOAS University of London* jsimon.rofe@soas.ac.uk

Transcript: Clarisse Machanguana
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Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff:

The first question I ask everyone is, for the transcript on the record, what is your name, age and how did you first arrive to the basketball world?

Clarisse Machanguana

Well, my name is Clarisse Machanguana, and I started playing basketball when I was six years old in Africa. Mozambique is the name of the country. It was something that my neighbours were doing, and it was fun, and it gradually became a virus in my blood that I loved it and then yeah it became my life path.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

What was basketball like in Mozambique when you were growing up? Was it popularly played? Who played? Was it for boys and girls? And how is that changed over time in your opinion?

Clarisse Machanguana

Basketball is a very popular sport in Mozambique, it's the one sport that gets more international trophies and recognition; while the average [person in] Mozambique also loves soccer, basketball, women's basketball is the one that often carries the flag with many wins.

I started playing as I said at six years old. I've never had any challenges in the sense of being discouraged because I'm a woman or that kind of thing. I just felt like people maybe did not understand why I was so tall. It wasn't as well appreciated I would say, as a young girl that I was 6'5 at 14, that was the only challenge that I felt I had.

While basketball is a loved sport and followed by many in Mozambique, the enthusiasm is not matched by a proper financial support and investment. The sport struggles with everything, proper facilities, equipment's, pay for referees and pro athletes; it's a constant struggle which reflects in the poor accomplishments worldwide, because the national teams aren't exposed to many international games that they can afford to go, there is little to none investment to coaches' clinics, players clinics and training abroad.

Has it changed overtime? No, it hasn't. There is a growing distrust between sports management and private sector business for past mis-management of funds. Sports continue to struggle to maintain themselves, with 'the fast food' mind concept that the world has turned into, the country has also learned to demand faster results from the players that represent the national team, oblivious to the fact that results are to be planted with all factors that allow desired results, practices, clinics, games local and international for overall experience, travels, proper facilities and so forth.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Okay, and how has that changed over the years, if at all?

Clarisse Machanguana

No, it hasn't changed, unfortunately. Unfortunately, in Africa, sometimes great opportunities for success are led by corrupt people who seek first to fulfil personal interests with an organization's funds or that from private sector. Corruption is a big evil and disrupts the growth of everything that sees this aspect take priority over team goals.

It would be interesting if Government were to consider sports an extension of school education and provide

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Okay, terrific, thank you. And so, keeping this very broad brush-stroke view in, how has basketball diplomacy helped you during your career as a player in Mozambique, then in the United States, and in your subsequent roles in the basketball world? How has that experience helped influence your vision of the possibilities and uses of sport?

Clarisse Machanguana

Basketball has allowed conversation with countries and people whom otherwise wouldn't have met or discussed the possibility of interaction. I have played in Egypt and Argelia were religiously we are so different. I have played in USA for more than a decade in places where people didn't even know Africa is not one country but rather a whole [group] of countries that speak different languages and hold different cultures.

Sports in the end carries itself with such diplomacy and high regard that [it] transcends many barriers otherwise impossible to overcome; it unifies cultures, missions, goals and so forth because it generates so much joy.

As one who often serves and advocates for youth with the sports and social activism flag to empower youth, I know how much sports has taken me, further than what I would have otherwise been exposed to. Just the travelling itself, it opened my world. The appreciation for other cultures and differences enriched beyond any material possession I might have dreamt of, and more than ever, I engage to use sports to empower as many youths as I can. It inspires, strengthens self-esteem and character, and as seen recently, it has also been used as a platform to expression a political position and stand.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Do you maybe have an anecdote you can share maybe from your time playing either at Old Dominion University or in the WNBA of a time when you represented and communicated about

Mozambique or its basketball culture to some of your teammates, or you learned something about US culture or basketball through them?

Clarisse Machanguana

I don't know if this is going to be a good joke because it's too real, but when I was still playing for the WNBA, I got to partner with a company called Fiber and PSI (Population Services International), it aids ministries with providing information about health concerns. But what they do in Mozambique is to encourage youth to use condoms because HIV is so big unfortunately.

So, I would often go around to schools talk about the importance of wearing a condom and caring for own health. In one of the sessions one young boy said that wearing condoms during sexual activity made as much sense as eating a banana with its peel. 'Have you ever heard that someone has eaten a banana without peeling it?' he asked. The classroom erupted in laughter but that was the level of ignorance that they were up against. The work ahead was to instil new behavioural habits that would make them understand that even though it may not be as natural or comfortable it was about preserving good health.

So, for me, it was very fulfilling work to do because I realized that often people's barriers weren't just lack of opportunities, but they were rather rooted in ignorance and poor access to education.

The question that kids in Mozambique ask me the most is: who was the witchdoctor/healer that guided me into success?

And when I tell them that I'm truly successful because of hard work, and not because of artificial means that they heard will work, they often don't believe. So, there are funny things, but at the same time, they tell a story that is very sad about Africa and how much work we have to do, and mostly, the importance of using sports to empower other people. Because it's not just about people being hungry in Africa but rather of making education accessible to all, it is that kind of information that will overcome whatever challenge. The biggest deprivation is not food, it is knowledge, without [it] people are doomed to generations and cycles of poverty.

I don't know if I'm explaining it well, but I'm very passionate about this issue, and it hurts me that some kids that could prosper don't go further because of the lack of education. Needless to say, that sports are a very important vehicle to educate youth and help them transcend that barrier.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Well, that brings me to another question, how do you view the intersections of basketball and diplomacy as they relate either to the African continent or more specifically to Mozambique? Do

you think they work well together or how do they work together in your experience in Mozambique?

Clarisse Machanguana

They work together well. Diplomacy works well yes, but I think it's a thing to explore because sports has been the unifier in all kinds of cultures and languages and cultures, and I think it will be useful any kind of challenge that is faced. So, I think it's an aspect to be made better, to be worked on, to be used further with most hurries I would say, because it would make the relations better, yeah.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

And given your extensive work, to what extent do you consider yourself to be a sports diplomat?

Clarisse Machanguana

Yeah, I don't think I could consider that because in my view, that could be an insult to people that actually studied diplomacy. I feel that maybe the platform I have acquired by being a sports role model is to be the vehicle I continuously to drive to empower kids with important messages that inspire and empower them.

For example, I have been making good use of Clarisse Machanguana Foundation to implement programs with activities that aim to maximize the values that kids learn in sports and use them to transcend and empower in their daily lives. I negotiate with youth, local leaders, traditional healers and other social influencers to bring about the world we all deserved, informed and prepped to maximize own talent. That will be called diplomacy, but I don't think I deserve that title because I didn't study it. But in the end, I might be doing the same thing.

It's an honour and a privilege to have such social influential power to persuade change for a better society. I liaison with ministries and organization to act as a sports ambassador and civil society diplomat to facilitate youth integration in society.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

And switching gears a little bit, who is in Mozambique is helping to develop basketball or who is conducting some kind of even informal basketball diplomacy and what do you think that impact has been on the game's growth in Mozambique?

Clarisse Machanguana

That's a very delicate question because obviously, the government takes pride in making sports available to all, so probably, they would want to be recognized as the ones that are empowering basketball, so that's the first point.

The second is, there are clubs and schools where any kid can go and play basketball. They have playgrounds and basketball facilities where everybody that want can go and play basketball. That is the official way to go and learn basketball.

Then there are the non-official formats, where people such as myself or other retired basketball players, may engage by own initiative for the love of sports to teach basketball, as a tool to develop to inspire and strengthen their self-esteem.

It is also imperative that local diplomacy within a country is also functional. Too many a time the picture that is painted is of different people or organizations working within, disconnected from the existing network, attempting to re-invent the entire system. This factor delays progress, it hinders fast learning, and it isolates people, those who know from those who have the means but may have lesser skills in other important aspects of the matter, and so forth.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Well, given this, who inspires kids to play basketball in Mozambique? Is it people such as yourselves who are out there day-to-day getting them involved? Is it homegrown basketball stars on the national team or who play elsewhere? Is it some of the global stars they see in NBA, a combination of everything?

Clarisse Machanguana

I would say it's a combination of everything. When I started playing basketball, most of the kids of my age didn't have a TV, so one would learn about basketball because either close friends played or someone within their family circle as it was for me.

In today's world, kids have access to such variety of information and programming that it would be hard to define what was the inspiring factor. Maybe I could venture say that for each sport there is one person within country that brings awareness, and from there the international icons take over, inspiring and setting dreams high, the likes of Michael Jordan, the late Kobe Bryant, Cristiano Ronaldo, Michael Phelps... all of whom within their sports have moved millions of people and led trendy and influential ways of life and style.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

I understand, and I appreciate your initial thoughts on that. Speaking of the national teams, either the men's team or the women's team, is there a particular style of basketball that they play?

Clarisse Machanguana

So, the question is, is there specific style that they learn? Is that the question?

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Well, I guess the question is more how would you describe the style of play of the Mozambique national team?

Clarisse Machanguana

I think that overall, African countries and even Europe, if we want to compare it to let's say with the U.S. the beginning, with fundamentals. When I began playing I was encouraged to learn all basketball positions, not just the one justified by my height. In the USA that I played people were invited to play one position, they would learn only regarding their position, that in my view limits the game and creativity. The game has evolved greatly because at least in the men's game it doesn't seem to have remained that way.

You see Kevin Durant, LeBron James, those guys who are very tall play multiple positions with elegance and dominance, just like in Europe a tall can shoot a 3-pointer, can bring the ball like a guard and so forth, this enriches the game because people become unguardable, not static because of their height or weight.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Okay, fair enough. So then, how does basketball play a role in creating identity in Mozambique or in South Eastern Africa?

Clarisse Machanguana

I don't know, may I venture say that all sports teach sportsmanship, goal orientation, discipline, focus, positive competition, respect for self and the adversary, so all of those things shape character as in identity.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Well, it's a very open-ended question. There's no real definition on identity. So, this is a question that came up when someone was trying to say that basketball yes, plays into a kind of national or regional identity, but it's also a global identity in terms of some of the ... you know basketball is there in elements of fashion and sneaker culture or music or film, a bit the-

Clarisse Machanguana

Yeah, I understand now. Well, this is a world now where everybody now wants to be relevant, and therefore, showing uniqueness is the thing that is trendy and cool to imitate or be about. Each country identifies itself or each sport by whatever sport dominates, and by having a sport that dominates, those public figures then become the culture, trendy people of that country.

For us, basketball and soccer are the ones where it actually pushes the new style or the trendy styles because most kids want to be like A, B, C and D. It seems to define identity, whether that

is a good thing or not it remains to be seen, considering that athletes for the most part don't choose fame but rather the sport. Also, they don't choose to become role models, they find themselves in that role, some embrace it with grace and responsibility while others have no clue of the impact they have on others. Truth seems to be that they influence many.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Okay and kind of piggy backing on that, you mentioned that you met no opposition as a young girl in Mozambique playing basketball.

Clarisse Machanguana

Yeah.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

In your opinion, do you think that basketball affords greater opportunities for women and girls to work towards gender equality or to learn through participation in the sport?

Clarisse Machanguana

Basketball affords great opportunities, for many such as myself, it was a life changer. In a society that has armed itself with megaphones called social media, basketball and many sports have also become a platform to voice an opinion, a political stand or other expressions of being. It is a vehicle, an instrument that through its power to mobilize millions is now used to convey deep convictions, a position, or a stand.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

A few questions on some more specific programs. I know you've been involved with the NBA's African Initiatives. In your view, what has been the impact of the NBA's work on basketball in Africa, maybe specifically in Mozambique?

Clarisse Machanguana

Well, I think the NBA, it has just shown that its impact is not just basketball because basketball is about a ball and running and sweating and making baskets, and it goes beyond that.

It goes beyond providing a platform where people with talents can go to school, and at the same time, maximize their talents. It is heightened by the likes of NBA Cares, which empowers communities, empowers youth so that when they leave the basketball court, they have life skills, tools to easily integrate in their society. When I wear the WNBA or NBA hat, I can go to a community and negotiate with local leaders about the importance of being vigilant and reinforce against allowing girls young as 11, 12 to marry a grown-up man just to briefly relief the parents from their economic struggle.

So, it is a huge platform, NBA doings in Mozambique and so many other countries because through sports, mobilized to be sensitized mobilize people to create for their players, for the community of their players and their prosperity.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

And would you include the Basketball Without Borders program under that umbrella, in terms of its impact, or is that a little bit separate?

Clarisse Machanguana

Yes, it cannot be separate. It cannot be separate because it's sports that gets things accomplished outside and inside of the basketball court. Here, we're talking about basketball because it is what I've done, and what you're now working with. But I believe that sports in general have that power, it has the power to change people's lives, not just in the sports field.

And obviously, Basketball Without Borders in Africa where there's so many challenges, it rings truth in so many levels. Take for example a kid that lives in the worst parts of Mozambique and take him to either Senegal or South Africa or whatever other country that his sports exists. He will for the first time get into an airplane, he will experience and share life with 15 other kids that come from different backgrounds, just that is eye opening ... He will be able to hear their stories, how they practice, how they study, how they make sacrifices for their dreams, what steps they have taken to further themselves to their dreams, and he/she will understand that difficulties are everywhere and they don't stop dreams, solutions and discipline to be learned and applied to surpass barriers.

So yes, definitely NBA, Basketball Without Borders (BWB), NBA Cares, as well as work that some players such as myself who have foundations are aimed to best positively impact million kids in this world.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

The last area I wanted to ask you about was Basketball Africa League, which takes off in less than two weeks now. In your view, why are people so excited about the Basketball Africa League and how do you view it's potential to develop basketball or some of these less tangible things associated through basketball across Africa?

Clarisse Machanguana

I'm going to give you an example that is totally out of scope ... maybe out of context. But just imagine that it was announced that anyone could go to the moon, even African kids who often exclude themselves from the hope train. But in all this information it would be forgotten to tell the Africans what agency to contact, person of reference to subscribe their application, time line of travel to the moon, and so forth, and just like that they would be left out, their dreams

shuttered, their potential unheard and their reality short of the chance to be improved. BAL is that, a trip closer to the moon where their talent will be lifted, worked on and maximized, where country of origin and economic situation will not be the impediment for success.

Because the sports business and tourism will also improve things in Africa. It will open a new market... My country and many other African countries are known for the flies that run across kids' faces, of poverty while waiting for the kinds of UNICEF to provide help; but a country doesn't have only one face. BAL is the opportunity for other countries to also appreciate other marvellous things about other countries. So, while it will all be spun by basketball it will not further just basketball. Basketball will be the tool to empower people's knowledge, to empower people's understanding, to empower people's interest in business and other areas. So, I think BAL will be all that.

It will be all that, a piece of heaven within our own continent where talent is being maximized and my biggest hope is that after acquiring higher education through basketball the players will return to their countries to be part of the development they saw where basketball took them. It's important to give back to society so that many are brought closer to be the talent they were given.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

I do have to ask, so the BAL, it is an African-driven initiative implemented by Africans and certainly Amadou Gallo Fall's vision, but it is a thing of the NBA, which is American even though certainly NBA employees and the league has globalized. Do you view the BAL in any way as neo-colonial or neo-imperial simply because the NBA is an American entity or is it very different because the BAL is very much a vision and being implemented by Africans?

Clarisse Machanguana

No, I don't view it as neo-colonial. I believe that it's important for any country to learn the ways that other countries who have been successful at doing something, do it. How they do it, is important. And then when you come to apply it in your country, or in your own reality, you can adapt it to the reality that you face within your country. Let me give you example, we as a foundation, we have Junior NBA. And while Junior NBA runs in many other countries, such as European and Asian continents, we all face different challenges.

I will venture to say that yes, it might be a replication of the NBA, but it will be adapted to the reality of Africa. And we cannot choose not to do things just because we're imitating the most developed countries, because otherwise, we'll continue to do the things that don't allow us to grow because we don't have points of reference. This is a good point of reference, the NBA. But I'm sure it will be adjusted to the African reality, so I don't see anything wrong with it.

I had the same challenge when I went back to Mozambique after basketball where I created the foundation to empower people. People would say, ‘Oh, you come from America, so you think you know better than us?’ I had to walk the thin line of respecting the traditional ways while applying my new acquired knowledge from the places basketball allowed me live in. That, among other things, is what BAL will be: a picture of the NBA, led by a man who has worked in the NBA, Amadou Gallo Fall, but also as an African man understands the barriers and challenges that are to be surpassed to have the league be successful. We are on a fast train to the change we want to see. It’s amazing to be part of it.

It can’t go bad. It can only go successful. Amadou is the key He understands both worlds. What BAL needs is the private sector to be behind it and give is as much push as possible.

Dr Lindsay Sarah Krasnoff

Well, speaking of talents, so what does success for the BAL look like in five years assuming that you can see into the future here, your crystal ball, what does that look like for the BAL?

Clarisse Machanguana

I don’t know because I don’t know what’s at stake. I don’t know what is their ambition. So, I’m a part of it because I’m African, and I’m rooting for them, but that is too difficult of a question. I guess failure would be not trying, just attempting to climb such high mountain is a success on itself, it lets get everyone involved.

END

Interview with Clarisse Machanguana, March 2020

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